



For Immediate Release
March 10, 2011

Contact: Scott Mulhauser/Erin Shields
(202) 224-4515

BAUCUS EXAMINES ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL FOSTER CARE TO BETTER SERVE AT-RISK YOUTH

Finance Chair Looks to Increase Flexibility to Develop Programs that Work for Kids

Washington, DC – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) today held a hearing to look at alternatives to programs that put children in need into traditional foster care. The hearing considered reauthorizing the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to give states flexibility to use federal foster care funds for more innovative programs. Baucus said today's hearing provided first-hand evidence of the importance of renewing these waivers and continuing to improve the foster care system.

"Giving states flexibility to be innovative with foster care funding and create new programs will be less disruptive and more accommodating to the needs of at-risk kids," said Baucus. **"The state waiver program has developed creative solutions that help improve foster care on a national level, including placing kids with relatives rather than in foster care, which is now an option for kids across the country. At-risk kids need every possible advantage, and restarting and bolstering the state waiver program give states flexibility to be creative and meet kids' needs. These innovations are certainly a big step in the right direction."**

Baucus heard from Charlie McNeely and Jojo Murdock, two young adults who spent much of their lives in the traditional foster care system. Baucus asked these witnesses about their experiences and heard from them about areas in need of improvement.

Specifically, Baucus heard from McNeely about the importance of connections with siblings and other biological family members while in foster care. McNeely stressed the importance of permanency for kids in discussing the challenges she had moving around group homes where she was not able to have consistent contact with her siblings or attend public school. Baucus heard from Murdock, who aged out of the foster system at age 18, about the importance of programs that prepare kids for that transition. She also stressed the importance of helping kids entering the system in discussing her own experience entering the foster system and being removed at age eight from a mother who struggled with mental illness, poverty and homelessness.

Baucus asked Crystal Ward Allen, the director of an organization that supports child welfare programs in Ohio, and Dr. William Bell, the President of the Casey Family Programs, an organization that advocates for quality child welfare programs across the country, if the state flexibility waivers help states address the problems laid out by the alumnae of the foster care system testifying today. He heard from Allen about programs made possible by the waivers that improve relationships with biological families, place kids with relatives instead of in foster care and prevent kids from entering care in the first place. He heard from Bell about a program Florida has created with its waiver to extend programs for foster kids through age 21 to help with the challenges of kids aging out of the system.

The number of children in the foster care system has declined by more than 80,000 over the last ten years and by nearly 40,000 over the last two years alone. Many child welfare experts believe this success was achieved, in part, because of states' use of demonstration waivers. In 1994, Congress gave HHS the authority to approve state demonstration projects, but Federal legislative authority to approve new child welfare waivers expired on March 31, 2006. There are currently waivers in seven states that remain active under short-term extensions, but Congressional action is necessary to give HHS the authority to approve new waivers. Currently, there are more than 423,000 children in the child welfare system.

#